

AUGUST 8, 1965

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Russian Bookshop

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STALIN and Trotsky, Mao and Khrushchev, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks all manage to co-exist in a large red (small "r" please) building on Columbia Road NW.

There, Victor Kamkin, a White Russian emigrant, runs the largest Russian bookstore in the free world. Since he came to Washington in 1952 with 15 books, he has built his bookstore into the kind of concern that capital-

ists everywhere can admire.

Kamkin, who has bushy white hair and speaks with a thick accent, now stocks more than half a million volumes and 35,000 titles. His accounts include universities all over the world, giant corporations, newspapers, public school systems, the Library of Congress and (shhhh!) the CIA, which pays cash.

When he started his business,

Kamkin's store was housed in a tiny 14th Street shopfront around the corner from the present location, a former church.

"Now it is getting like a department store," he says. "People want to buy things from the Soviet Union, so I stock them." In addition to the books, he also sells phonograph records, religious articles, Soviet artworks, canned food, caviar, china, musi-

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cal instruments and toys.

The titles in Kamkin's book catalogue cover every conceivable field. "We have the Russian classics, scientific treatises, atlases, the great American and English works translated into Russian and, yes, we have the Communist doctrine, too," he notes. Several years ago, Kamkin began his own publishing house in West Germany which produces many of the books he sells. He is also the world's largest distributor outside the USSR of Russian newspapers and periodicals.

Born in Leningrad, Kamkin left his native land and crossed the Manchurian border when the White Russian army laid down its arms in 1922.

"I finished high school and graduated from college in China," he recalled. "Then I entered the book business in Shanghai." There he met his wife, Helena, the daughter of a Russian bureaucrat on loan to the Chinese.

The Kamkins left China during the Communist revolution in 1949 and came to San Francisco, then lived on a friend's farm in California for two years.

Since coming to Washington, the Kamkins say, they have experienced few political problems associated with operating the

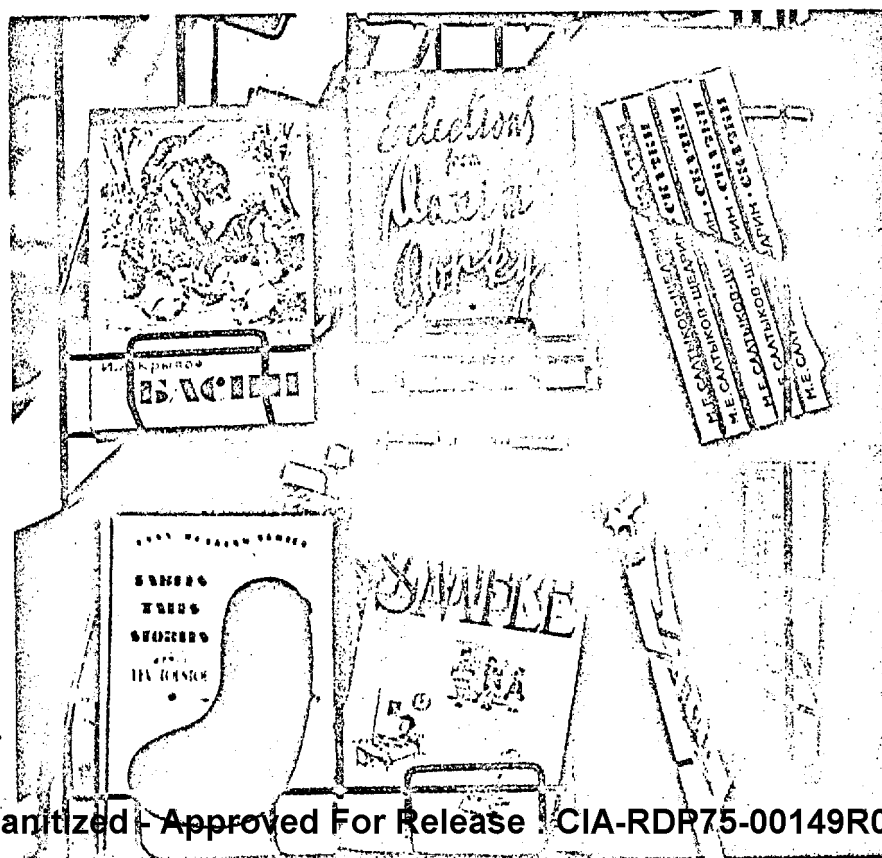
Russian store. "After all," he says, "the federal government is one of our biggest customers."

Recently, however, H. L. Hunt's right-wing "Life Line" radio program heard about the Columbia Road store and launched a broadcast attack on what it called "a large Red propaganda center in the very heart of our nation's capital."

Noting that the store is in an old church, the program described Kamkin's books as "atheistic and Communist propaganda" and charged the owner of the property "didn't have the slightest idea the tenants were intending to use the church building" for Russian books.

Kamkin, imbued generously with the Russian sense of humor, is amused by the Hunt attack. "They should check their facts," he said. "Before I came here the building was a dancing studio and before that it was an Alcoholics Anonymous headquarters. And I don't even know what it was before that."

The building is now owned by a funeral home and in many of the structure's nooks and crannies books are stored against caskets. "They make good and quiet company for my books," Kamkin quips. "Everything here co-exists."



Kamkin's has children's books by Russian authors in English and Russian.

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